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'Traders in Information': The Public Interest and Policy Debate from a News Media Perspective

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Function of the Fourth Estate

I was brought up in the Open Brethren Church where a succession of Sunday services began with morning worship. Wooden pews were arranged in a circle and the congregation sat in contemplation until the Holy Spirit moved someone to make a contribution.

But the elders became impatient with the Holy Spirit's apparent propensity for long periods of silence, and so they began a ring around beforehand to arrange matters. Inevitably the organisation meant the Holy Spirit was taken out of the loop and a simple meditation was replaced with another set service.

Maybe that is where I learned that in our culture silence is a vacuum to be filled. If silence is a vacuum to be filled then one must compete to be heard. Public servants and journalists live by their ability to be heard in that competitive information market.

We live by trading in information. In journalism that has some strictly commercial meanings, but for our purposes the significant context is that we are traders in the sense that we exchange information with the purpose of adding value.

The privilege of journalism is widespread access to people who share a common interest, but who are unable or unwilling to talk to each other. It gives us an often unique perspective because we have the time, purpose and skills to sift through those different viewpoints and distil common ground and points of difference. Our aim is to perceive the whole from the sum of all its parts—but commercial imperatives make such perfection elusive so we invariably fill the vacuum from the available information.

The policy analyst also seeks to trade information with others: academics, government and private sector agencies, politicians and the citizenry, and add value by distilling public interest issues and offering solutions.

Journalists and public servants are different parts of the same process. The function of the fourth estate is to hold the decision makers to account. In that sense, journalists tend to be in perpetual opposition. The function of the Public Service is to give full, frank and fearless advice to those in power, In that sense, public servants tend to be in perpetual government. The commonality is that we are both perpetual: while governments change as a matter of course, we provide continuity and history through permanence.

But there is a natural tension between us. The journalists' job is to take your solutions and attempt to falsify them. We have a function to find and exploit the weak points of Government. That creates a healthy professional tension between us and Government. We work, as your conference brochure puts it, in that tense and dangerous area of the tidal zone where land and water meet.

State Sector Restructuring and the Media

The focus of that tension is shifting. Where it was once largely between journalists and the elected wing of government, now state sector restructuring has changed the lines of accountability. There are now situations were accountability rightly rests with public servants. And equally there are times when confused lines of accountability mean public servants allow, or have foisted on them, ultimate responsibility. I can think of no better example where the buck has stopped short with public servants than in housing policy.

The restructuring has also been accompanied by a trend away from neutrality. From my perspective, the neutral Public Service started eroding in the early 1980s and blossomed into politicisation with the publication in 1984 of *Economic Management* and its more political companion volumes in 1987, *Government Management.*

My impression is there is now greater subtlety, but the ideological mapping continues to dominate over the ferment of the process of contestable advice. The unified Public Service dedicated to practical problem solving seems to me to have moved in the direction of a committed Public Service which derives its problems and solutions from a prevailing ideology. Where the two approaches attempt to coexist, there is a hierarchy and an environment that legislates in favour of the ideological approach.

In this environment, information trading changes. Information becomes intellectual property with strategic, competitive or commercial values attached. The notion of a unified Public Service freely sharing information for common purpose is squeezed out. The result is a changing culture within the Public Service and new behaviours.

Journalists have felt the effects. Their access to information and experts is restricted. For example, the trend to contracting out restricts our access to expert opinion, particularly viewpoints for attribution. There is nothing more calculated to restrict contract opportunities than to appear in the news media on issues of controversy, particularly, but not exclusively, if the views do not accord with prevailing thinking.

'Right-thinkingness' pervades public debate and it is not considered career enhancing to kick against it. The news media are not free of its pernicious affects.

The development of a policy elite based on a shared vision is an excluding process. It means a narrow group holds on to advice and controls the flow of it to the executive. Public servants cut out of the process can become disenchanted and seek alternative ways to have their advice debated. In my experience that is by far the most common cause of leaked information. Isolated leaks will always occur for various reasons, but if there is a spate of leaks it is a sure sign that the system is failing. It happens because the formal advice process has become anything but full, frank and fearless.

In the process, public debate descends into public battle. Take a recent example, the industrial relations reforms. There a number of policy advisers in several agencies felt excluded and believed that ideological mapping was taking place. The prospect of reasoned debate over an extensive package was killed stone dead by leaks and the prevailing image of 'Mad Max who wants to sell Christmas'.

The process risks exposing Ministers to advice that has not withstood the rigour of contestability and practical problem solving. That is ultimately a disservice because there's a high risk that it will fail to identify problems in selling ideas politically. It may well deliver what a Minister would like to hear and believe is possible, but not what he or she ought to hear, thus setting the Minister up for failure.

Some of these concerns are not isolated to a perhaps coloured, journalistic perspective. Last year, when she was still State Services Minister, Jenny Shipley gave a speech which included some of these themes. Here is some flavour from it:

'The model to which we are working in New Zealand is extraordinarily seductive in theoretical terms but it does not automatically translate into a three-dimensional, live, smoothly-functioning system...'

'Put bluntly, there needs to be a substantial improvement in the quality of policy advice available to Government...'

'Nowhere near enough people understand how to go about thorough, objective analysis, or know how to consult effectively, or are able to present a compelling argument and options for ministers to consider...'

'I must covey to you the despair that ministers feel when what is supposed to be an intelligent policy debate degenerates into a snarling-match between agencies...'

'You must not allow your departments to become cautious, orthodox or formula-ridden...'

and finally: '*The successes, however impressive and numerous they may be, tend to count for little when a minister is facing a battery of cameras and microphones and a jostling throng of journalists who fancy they have caught a whiff of blood...*'

To be fair to you, I commend a rereading of that speech to its author in her present capacity with a view to taking on board some of the points within her own executive.

Another impact of the shift in Public Service culture is the greater desire for secrecy. That is most evident in the increasing instances where public servants subvert the spirit and intent of the Official Information Act.

In journalism, information has a short shelf life and that makes us vulnerable to the plethora of delaying techniques, unlawful practices and tricks to escape the provisions of the Act that are resorted to.

The Privacy Act too has proved a problem, not through its provisions or purpose, but because it adds to the arsenal of those who, out of ignorance, laziness or disposition, would frustrate the processes of open debate.

The new Public Service culture has heightened suspicion, so that journalists seeking neutral or even favourable comment are fended off.

Recently Radio New Zealand broadcast a story that voluntary organisations were united in refusing to cooperate with the community wage scheme. We wanted to contact groups supporting the scheme to balance the report. The public servants concerned refused to pass on the names of any organisations taking part so the report that went to air and helped shape public opinion was largely negative.

The awkward start to MMP government has heightened that suspicion. Management of information in the touchy era of coalition government dictated to by a comprehensive and contradictory policy agreement between two incompatible parties proved, in the end, impossible. I doubt we will see that model again. Its replacement is likely to be coalitions in broad policy agreement negotiating over how far and how fast rather than in what direction. That, I suspect, will take some of the heat and difficulty out of the policy advice business.

We are in transition and institutions are naturally more wary at such times. But I see the system evolving in a positive direction, most particularly in a comeback for the process of merit argument. The process of public interest agenda setting and debate should be robust and rigorous. Ideological viewpoints are a crucial part of that, but in a contestable environment where scrutiny ensures that merit prevails.

Journalism in Australia

An impression I gained while covering the Australian election is that politics and the art of government are played out more in the centre there. The issues are the same but the debate is at the level of what is politically achievable and workable. There is less willingness to argue that purity of position will automatically deliver competitive advantage. Issues of equity remain central ingredients in policy debate in Australia, not, as it seems here, assumed outcomes of correct theory, if indeed they are considered at all.

Here when you cite the evidence that the richest are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer, and the vast majority are at best standing still, it is often as not dismissed as a tiresome cliche. My impression is that in Australia it is regarded as a serious policy issue to be addressed. The idea that a disenchanted, grumpy middle class is a dangerous political breeding ground that spawns such 'lash-out' movements as One Nation has not sunk in here yet.

Another impression from Australia is that journalists perform at a higher level. There seems to be greater scrutiny, greater tolerance of it by the politicians and greater demand for it by the public. Two television channels free of advertising and committed to quality programming backed up by ABC Radio, and quality papers like *The Sydney Morning Herald, The Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* certainly helps.

The experience also confirmed that the demands on journalists have shifted. The public no longer has the time to digest the vast amount of information available and that means journalism is increasingly shifting away from straight reporting towards

analysis and informed comment. That cannot be delivered under the simple traditional journalistic model of objectivity. If it ever existed it has outlasted its usefulness. It requires a more demanding and sophisticated model: one that we must be able to explain, own and apply. We have some way to go. The onus is on publicly-owned news media that are free of commercial imperatives to lead in defining public interest issues and scrutinising solutions on offer.

There is a view that journalism in New Zealand is not up to the task. It is certainly true that we compete with other sectors for scarce talent. Structurally our industry has focused the career path and incentive structures narrowly on management positions so that we do not have the numbers of seasoned journalists with the experience and history at the coal face that you see overseas.

A response to this in New Zealand has been attempts to short circuit the media in trying to generate debate on public interest issues. The most successful, or at least clever, to my mind is The Environment Minister, Simon Upton's approach to the executive's demands for reform of the Resource Management Act. Papers have been made available on the Internet and the issues have been there for any interested party to debate. The sky didn't fall in because ideas were broadcast to the public before they went to Cabinet, though I'm sure those among Mr Upton's colleagues who want the Act gutted would have prefered a more narrow debate. A cynic might say the formation of a powerful lobby to 'save the Resource Management Act' is a mark of the strategy's success. Certainly it showed more political cunning than the secretive and somewhat shady approach to the public interest issue of extending West Coast native logging—another case where the process meant the entire proposal was leaked and the policy makers lost the initiative. Other recent direct approaches include the code of family and social responsibility, the more simple approach of television advertising to encourage people to dob in beneficiaries they suspect are defrauding the system, and the mailout to superannuants.

Enhancing the Level of Debate in the News Media

But none of this stops the media from getting in on the act. Like it or lump it, we will take part in the debates. If we won't go away, and I promise you we won't, then what steps can senior managers in the Public Service take to influence and enhance the level of debate in the news media?

1 None whatsoever if deep down, or even on the surface, you are not committed to debate. And by debate I mean subjecting your ideas to public scrutiny with a view to taking the results on board. If the public view doesn't matter—and at times it seems it doesn't—then simply try and exclude us. Most of the time, you'll win. Just think now, for every leak you've had to damage control, how many do you get away with? Would a 95 per cent success rate be a fair guess?

2 If (1) above applies, be prepared to accept that the journalists will do everything in their power to fill the information vacuum, even if that means, for example, that despite their best efforts only critics of the community wage get an airing.

3 If (1) above does not apply, then understand and appreciate the reasons why journalists attempt to personalise public policy issues and exploit areas of weak-

ness. It may seem irritating, negative and intellectually offensive but it is an integral part of public interest debate, and when done in a thorough and professional manner, an exacting task.

4 Use background briefings, informal chats and your public information staff to foster trust relationships with journalists. I'm not suggesting you share confidences that are improper, but I have never seen a report that was the worse for foreknowledge and good grounding. Journalists live by their ability to respect boundaries and confidences. They know that once burnt, twice shy. There is a professional tension between us that cannot be lost sight of, but there is also too much distance. Journalists can actually be a useful conduit in testing policy without it being official or attached to any particular agency or initiative. It can save an awful lot of trouble, or provide valuable feedback, in the long-run. That is particularly so if, as seems so frequent now, the policy is driven by the Government rather than research-based.

5 Stop being so touchy about controversy. Public debate demands it. Use the Official Information Act as it was intended to foster debate over different viewpoints.

6 Subject the ideologues or strongly principled amongst your policy analysts to scrutiny by those equally but oppositely persuaded. Let the politically streetwise leven their efforts, and hope the exercise in merit argument rubs off on the news media.

And finally:

7 If you do nothing else could you please do what you can to help sort out the confusion that surrounds the role and functions of select committees. I defy anyone to distil a coherent approach from the recent examples of the Government's treatment of the electricity reform hearings, the work test regime, the Ngai Tahu Bill, income and asset testing of geriatric care and the ACC reforms.